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SUBJECT: KING OF RAI LATEST WESTERN SAHARA CASUALTY

REF: RABAT 496

¶1. According to Algerian press reports and an Algerian concert goer in Morocco, Algerian pop star Cheb Khaled, known as the King of Rai music, was briefly assaulted on June 1 by a Moroccan concert audience angry at his known affection for the cause of Western Saharan independence. After a Spanish concert in May in which Khaled wore the Sahrawi flag on his shoulders, Algerian French-language daily Le Jeune Independant reported on June 5 that Khaled received "an interesting financial offer" from the Moroccan concert organizers to use the June 1 concert in Meknes to publicly change his views. After he allegedly declined the offer, the crowd treated him to a brief shower of glass bottles and insults. Khaled had refused to perform inside the territory of Western Sahara earlier in the year.

A SINGER WRAPPED IN THE SAHRAWI FLAG

¶2. Khaled's sympathies for Western Sahara and the Polisario are well known - he declined to participate in the February 28 - March 3 music festival in the city of Dakhla, stating on Algerian radio that "one cannot be a music Ambassador for peace in the world and ignore people's rights." (Note: Dakhla lies well inside the territory of Western Sahara. End note.) During the month of May, Khaled, whose full name is Khaled Hadj Brahim, performed during the International Festival of Peoples Cultures in Spain. While singing, he at one point carried the Western Sahara flag on his shoulders, an act not lost on the Algerian public, for whom Khaled is a national icon. According to Leila Bouzar, a reporter for Algerian channel 3 radio, the Makhzen (Moroccan institutions of state) "is becoming more and more aggressive as far as Western Sahara is concerned," and that the recent impasse in the Manhasset negotiations had served to arouse public passions over the issue in both Morocco and Algeria. Nadia Cheriet, advisor to the Minister of Culture, told us on June 7 that "it is sad to see politics infringing on culture" in this way, adding that "we have seen him singing with the Moroccan flag, the Lebanese flag, the Palestinian flag, so why shouldn't he sing with the Sahrawi one?"

INTERMARRIAGE ONLY GOES SO FAR

¶3. The June 1 concert was Khaled's first appearance in Morocco since the Spanish concert. According to an Algerian fan living in Casablanca, the concert started smoothly but then went south when one fan threw a bottle at him. This, said our contact, "was a signal for others to follow." Several more glass bottles followed, along with shouts of "traitor." Khaled suffered a minor leg injury from the glass and had to leave the stage for fifteen minutes. When he returned, he pointed out to the audience that "you know how much I am attached to Morocco. You know that my wife, the mother of my daughters, is Moroccan." By brandishing his own

personal pan-Maghreb credentials, Khaled succeeded in putting a stop to the insults and bottle throwing, and the concert continued, albeit amidst a tense atmosphere.

COMMENT: MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

¶4. Khaled himself embodies both the promise and challenges of pan-Maghreb integration. An Algerian pop icon without equal, he hails from Western Algeria, is married to a Moroccan, adamantly supports the Western Sahara cause, and has achieved fame throughout the Arab and francophone world. Given the propensity of Rai music to focus on love, politics and sensuality (the genre, born in Western Algeria and Morocco, derives its name from the Arabic word for "opinion"), several prominent Rai singers were killed by Islamists in the 1990s. Khaled's own life was threatened several times and, while still considering himself an Algerian patriot, he has lived in France and Belgium ever since the early 1990s. The June 1 concert in Meknes served as an unfortunate reminder that, while culture crosses borders within the Maghreb, politics - as represented by Algerian attitudes towards Morocco's stance on the Western Sahara and reopening the borders - still has a long way to go.

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